

# **STUDY OF THE IMPACTS OF SCHOOL SAFETY LEGISLATION**

**conducted for  
The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee**

**by  
Praxis Research  
Katherine A. Carlson, Ph.D.  
Project Director**

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS - 1999 SURVEY OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

The 1997 Washington State Legislature took action related to ensuring school safety in E2SHB 1841, a bill that seeks to improve knowledge about safety risks posed by individual students as well as to increase the capacity for schools and teachers to address these risks and related problems. The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (GJJAC) is responsible for studying the impacts of this legislation, and contracted with Praxis Research to conduct the study.

In late October 1999, a questionnaire was the principals of a selected sample of 325 Washington State schools. The sample included only middle schools, junior highs and high schools (including alternative schools), and was drawn to incorporate large and small schools located throughout the state. The 1998 survey of all state school districts, also done for this study, found that very small, K-8 school districts had little or no experience with the problems cited in the legislation and thus were in a poor position to report on its implementation or impacts. They were excluded from this survey sample.

A total of 319 schools received the questionnaires; 106 middle/junior high and 162 high schools; 51 were alternative schools. The questionnaire sought information about the perceived extent of the problems of safety and security in the respondent's school, the legislation's effects and contributions to school safety, and any difficulties in implementation. A copy of the survey questions and overall responses is attached.

### **Characteristics of Responding School Districts:**

A total of 182 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 57 %: Return rate by school type was 54% for middle schools/junior highs, 62% from high schools, and 47% from alternative schools. Surveys were returned from schools in all of the state's 39 counties, and the distribution of returns was fairly evenly divided between schools located in the eastern and western portions of the state – 43% and 57% respectively. A complete listing of all sample schools with an identification of those who responded is attached.

The enrollment of the schools represented in the returns ranged from very small (12) to very large (2492). Overall, the average enrollment of responding schools was 690; the median was 525. The 24 alternative schools tended to have the fewest students, with a median enrollment of 150. The median enrollments of middle school/junior high and high school respondents was

similar – 550 and 571 – but the larger schools in the returns were high schools, and 25% of these were schools with more than 1300 students.

### **Significant School Safety Problems:**

The first survey question listed school safety concerns from the legislation and asked respondents to identify which of these were felt to be significant problems in their schools. The smaller schools tended to identify all these less frequently than medium or large ones.

- 68% of the respondents selected “disruptive behavior in the classroom” as a significant problem. This was especially true for middle schools/junior highs (83%), but less significant for alternative schools (38%). A majority of respondents (52%) also noted “harassment of students and school staff.” Here also, this problem was most associated with middle schools/junior highs (63%), and least likely in alternative schools (25%).
- Other significant problems identified were selected less frequently, 38% identifying “violence or threats directed at other students and school staff,” and 37% “use of drugs and alcohol on campus.”
- Very large schools were disproportionately likely to view violence or threats to students and staff as problems, with this identified as a concern by 66% of the 29 high schools with over 1200 students.
- Very large schools also tended to identify alcohol and other drug problems as significant. These problems also were also associated with older students, selected by 45% of the high schools and 42% of the alternative schools, but just 21% of the middle schools and junior highs.
- Overall, larger schools were more likely to identify all the problems listed as being concerns while smaller schools tended to limit identified problems to classroom disruption.
- Respondents identified several other behavioral problems that were noted as issues in other areas of the questionnaire as well. Most of these concerned one of the following: 1) truancy and attendance; and 2) negative or disrespectful attitudes; and 3) drug/alcohol use off campus. Several principals cited problems responding to disruptive behaviors by special education students. Principals of alternative schools were most likely to specify some other school safety problem.
- Asked to identify which of these behaviors was considered to be the single most significant disciplinary problem, most respondents (53%) select disruptive behaviors in the classroom and on campus; 21% selected harassment or violence towards students and staff.

### **School Policies:**

The second group of questions in the survey dealt with school safety plans and policies and an assessment of their effectiveness.

- Most respondents (76%) reported that there was a school violence prevention and crisis response plan in place for their building. For 56%, this plan was current while for 20% it needed updating. Three quarters of the schools without a plan were in the process of developing one. Alternative schools were least likely to have a current plan.
- 42% of the respondents definitely felt that their district’s present policies adequately address issues related to school safety, 49% felt that this was somewhat true, and a scant 10% felt school safety issues were not adequately covered by their policies. Having a current school safety plan was related to greater satisfaction with district safety policies.

### **Implementation and Response:**

A related set of questions asked about the implementation of these policies and other procedures associated with school safety, specifically singling out elements called for in E2SHB 1841.

- Schools were most likely to be in compliance with the requirements for the school principal to provide information to the student's teachers and other school personnel about student convictions in adult court or diversion or adjudication in juvenile court: 67% of the principals responded that this information sharing occurred in their schools regularly or routinely; 24% that it occurred but not so regularly; and 9% that this happened rarely or never. Responses were similar for all school types.
- Schools reported only a somewhat less favorable pattern of responsiveness to the legislation requirements for the courts or law enforcement to notify the school principal when a student is convicted: 57% answered that this occurred regularly or routinely; 31% that this was not done regularly; and 12% that it happened never or rarely. There were no significant differences by school type but middle schools/junior highs were disproportionately likely to report being notified.
- Schools were least likely to receive information about a transferring student's previous involvement in violence or criminal behaviors from the student's former school. Just 29% reported that this happened regularly or routinely, 40% that information was received but not as a matter of course, and 35% that it was received rarely or never. Half of the respondents from alternative schools answered that they rarely or never heard from former schools.

Respondents were asked if they had experienced or would anticipate any difficulties ensuring that the information they provided to teachers and other school personnel remained confidential.

- Views about confidentiality were approximately evenly distributed between the expectation that this was not and would not be violated and the expectation or experience of this information being distributed more widely than intended.
- Several of the principals who felt that confidentiality would be maintained reported steps taken to ensure this, noting that staff were regularly trained and informed about confidentiality requirements and expectations. For some, assurance of confidentiality was attributed to the professionalism of the school's staff.
- Some of those who expressed no concern about confidentiality explained this view as a belief that the information would be known by other routes in any case, citing the small size of their communities, the tendency of students to talk among themselves, and a student's reputation.
- A similar rationale was used by many of the principals who were concerned about breaches of confidentiality. These respondents also cited community size, gossip, and student comments, as seen in this comment: "It never stays confidential in a small town – everybody knows everybody's business."
- These respondents identified as well that papers would be left on desks, files were insecure, teachers would talk among themselves, and that teachers and other staff would sometimes talk in the community.
- Several principals pointed out how the need to pass on information to staff about students inevitably creates a confidentiality risk. "There is always a risk as the number of people with knowledge increases," wrote one high school principal. Noted another, "Yes, human nature."
- A few respondents characterized the "balancing act" required between trying to protect students and employees while also offering the student an education. It was felt to be

important to pass information on to staff but this was accompanied by an increased potential that the confidentiality of such information would be compromised.

**Additional School Safety Strategies:**

The survey instrument asked if schools were using one or more of several common programs or approaches to preventing and intervening in school violence.

- The most frequent approaches used to improve school security were school security aides (cited by 48%) and on-duty law enforcement officers or School Resource Officers (32%). Fewer schools made use of video surveillance cameras (21%) or routine locker searches (17%); 28% of the principals reported that they utilized none of these strategies.
- High schools (and larger schools) were more likely to have both school security aides and School Resource Officers as well as to use video surveillance. Larger schools were significantly more likely to have some of these security features in place than smaller schools which often had none of these specific security features. Only locker searches were more likely to be used in smaller schools.
- Principals also were asked if their schools had student prevention and intervention programs. A majority of the schools offered anger management (62%) and conflict resolution training (56%), and 47% indicated they used peer mediation. About a fifth of the schools (22%) utilized Second Step or some other violence prevention program and 26% wrote in some other approach, most often a support group, life skills, or natural helper program.
- Smaller schools were more likely to have some type of prevention program such as Second Step; larger schools were more likely to have conflict resolution training or peer mediation.
- A majority of the respondents (62%) felt that the teachers and other staff at their schools had adequate training in violence prevention, but 91% of these also felt additional training would be helpful: 38% did not feel their school's staff were adequately trained.
- The principals gave their school a rating for its capacity to prevent and intervene in violent or aggressive student behaviors: 21% rated their school as excellent, 55% as good, 21% as fair, and 3% as poor.
- These assessments were significantly related to their views about the adequacy of staff training. Principals who felt their staff was not adequately trained tended to also rate their school's capacity to respond less favorably.

**Disciplinary Actions:**

Respondents were asked to provide an assessment of change in the disciplinary actions taken in their schools, comparing referrals during the 1998-99 school year with those for 1996-97. Collection of data on disciplinary actions is called for in the legislation. However, other than for weapons, there is no standardized format for compiling these data or any required reporting of this information. The 1998 school district survey found that these factors made comparisons of data across schools and school years unreliable and thus useless for purposes of assessing change. Respondents to this survey were not asked for specific details or counts of disciplinary actions but were requested simply to provide a judgement as to whether current referrals were higher, the same, or lower than those two years previously.

<b>DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS DURING 1998-99 SCHOOL YEAR COMPARED TO 1996-97</b>						
	<b>Higher</b>		<b>Same</b>		<b>Lower</b>	
		<b>HS</b>		<b>HS</b>		<b>HS</b>
		<b>M S</b>		<b>M S</b>		<b>M S</b>
Referrals for alcohol/ drug violations (173)	23%	23 23	57%	59 52	21%	19 25
Referrals for class- room disruption (175)	23%	20 32	49%	53 41	28%	29 27
Referrals for fighting (173)	9%	11 9	45%	44 50	46%	44 41
Referrals for threats/ harassment (174)	43%	46 45	41%	43 38	16%	10 18
Referrals for vandalism (171)	6%	8 4	50%	48 54	44%	43 43
Suspensions (173)	21%	17 29	53%	59 46	26%	24 25
Expulsions (170)	15%	17 16	55%	57 52	30%	26 32

- 174 of the respondents provided some data for this section of the questionnaire. The table below gives their responses.
- In four of the areas, respondents most often felt that disciplinary referrals were unchanged during the two-year period, and where there were changes, these were about evenly distributed between higher and lower numbers of referrals. These responses indicated no marked shift in disciplinary actions and no dominant pattern of change for alcohol/drug violations, classroom disruption, suspensions, or expulsions.
- One area – referrals for threats/harassment – was more likely to be reported as for the 1998-99 school year than in 1996-97: 43% of the respondents noted an increase, a change that was cited by a majority of the larger high schools.
- Two areas of disciplinary action – fighting and vandalism – were more likely to have been reduced than to have increased: 46% and 44% cited a decrease in fighting, 44% saw a reduction in referrals for vandalism.

#### **Comments:**

Nearly every respondent identified some need in response to the request for what else they would like to do or obtain to further ensure school safety. Most identified multiple needs.

- Many of the respondents identified specific needs for security equipment, such as cameras or lights, with these often linked to needs for more security staff or a law enforcement officer on campus.

- One high school principal called for, “Ongoing staff training in recognizing, preventing, and de-escalating potentially violent students. Ongoing training in identifying and implementing resiliency factors.”
- This principal offered three such concrete suggestions: “1) Funds to be used to place emergency phones in all classrooms; 2) A toll-free 1-800 number for students and parents to use to forewarn school of possible concerns; 3) Video cameras in place all around the school and parking areas.
- The following comment both identified such needs and questioned how these are presently being addressed. “Additional state funding for programs related to violence prevention and preparedness for crises. If these issues are truly important, they should be financially supported.”
- Another common request was for additional staff training and development, with funding to support this and planning for security needs.
- Several respondents also listed a wish for student programs, specifically citing more training in conflict resolution, additional counselors, and support for programs to encourage student involvement and responsibility.
- This theme of funding for priority concerns appeared several times in these comments, with the call for, “State funding not in the form of competitive grants,” and another request of, “Funding for additional SRO time.”

Numerous respondents wrote of one area of needs whose resolution would require legislative changes. This issue is in regard to limits or barriers to the school’s ability to respond to safety concerns when the student involved is designated as a special education student. This is an especially troubling problem for school administrators who want to expel a violent student to address school safety concerns, but cannot do so due to that student’s status and Individualized Education Plan.

- This lengthy and detailed suggestion from one middle school principal covered the substance of this need and its significance: “A change in legislation as it applies to students with IEPs (Special Education classification) and 504 plans. AS the law currently exists, students in these categories have “protections” from appropriate disciplinary actions that in cases of threats, disruptions and violence limits the school’s ability to ensure a safe environment for all students. This is a HUGE issue!”
- A related suggestion asked for additional funding to support alternative education for violent students, a need which was not seen as well supported by general education.

The final survey question was a general one asking about experience in trying to improve the safety and security of students and staff. Respondents also were asked to express how they felt about the helpfulness or not of these and similar legislative actions and to identify any problems with their implementation.

- Many respondents welcomed the Legislature’s actions, as expressed by this principal: “I think they are a step in the right direction. Eliminating students from the campus when their agenda is something other than education is very important for the safety of the majority.” Another stressed how the legislation assisted the schools to take action, writing how “I feel the legislation is helpful. It has given us more clout with students and parents.”
- Respondents viewed these state efforts in the context of broader concerns about school safety. This principal noted: “Appreciate their efforts - with what is going on nationally, it is

great to have support and plans for if an emergency would occur.”

- The national concentration on school safety was related to local actions, as expressed in this comment: “Legislative action defines parameters or needs we must address. More important impact are the violence issues in American high schools as reported in the news. This has had a positive impact on bringing students, staff, and parents together to develop pro-active plans to deal with safety.”
- This principal identified another impact of the spotlight on school safety, writing that while “I am finding that schools and law enforcement officials are increasingly cooperating with one another. I am concerned with the amount of legislative and media attention to seriously violent behavior. We see relatively little of this behavior and the attention, while in some cases necessary, I believe is contributing to an inaccurate perception of school being an unsafe, rather than a safe place for students.”
- Most respondents also felt there were some shortcomings with the legislation, or as stated by this principal, “Good intentions, poor implementation.” Another wrote that “Safety and security is a new area of responsibility for teachers and administrators. We need time and resources for in service. Increased safety practices and higher expectations for student learning is stretching the system.” Several respondents pointed out the problems basing funding for safety programs on enrollment in very small schools.
- Multiple comments identified how important it is that legislation be accompanied by other assistance, as expressed by this principal: “We need the laws, but; - we need help with ideas and programs that work - we need funding for training, planning and implementation - we need time for training, planning and implementation. Wrote another, “Being safe at school is paramount to all of us who learn and teach here. More efforts should come from the state to inform, train, and guarantee our safety.” Others called for improvements in “...the intervention programs available to students who have been identified and exhibit tendencies toward violence.”
- Several respondents remarked on the legislation’s contributions to the “sharing of information between schools and other schools as well as juvenile justice.” Another principal agreed that “The most helpful action has been the transfer of student discipline records,” then qualified this by adding “but, these have rarely come with the student’s other records and are usually only obtained after a phone call is made requesting them from the previous school.”
- Other difficulties with implementation repeated the previously identified issues associated with special education students. Although praising the legislation’s intent, these respondents also found shortcomings: “The legislative action has been long in coming. It has been helpful. We need to change the laws related to special education students in relation to violence, gang involvement, harassment and weapons. We need total support of the legal system to eliminate the violent student from our schools.” Wrote another: “In general, these measures have been helpful and supportive. Special ed laws, concerns about confidentiality, and due process, and the sensitivity around everyone’s “rights” make this a challenging situation.”
- Respondents also returned to the distribution of security funds through competitive grants. This respondent pointed out how “Most of the enhancements we would like to see in the safety and security arena are hindered by lack of funding. Our second security officer is due to a state grant. He makes a HUGE difference.” This respondent had similar experiences, reporting that “I’m fairly ambivalent about the overall impact of legislative efforts. Our

school district had done a remarkable job in its attempt to improve school safety and security. The problem is one of resources and negative financial implications on district budgets. School safety and security funding should be part of the state's funding of basic education.”

- Another posed the question: “If school safety is a high priority for ALL SCHOOLS, why offer competitive grants to help fund security or safe school programs?” As another principal categorically stated, “Safety grants should not be a competitive process.” Concluded another: “All schools have needs, so fund the needs.”